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# **Embodying Experience**

## **A video-based examination of visitors' conduct and interaction in museums**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This paper argues that social interaction fundamentally underpins how people examine, experience and make sense of museum exhibits. It reveals how people collaboratively view and make sense of artwork and other kinds of exhibit, and in particular how the ways of looking at and responding to exhibits arise in social interaction.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The analysis inspects in detail video-recordings of visitors' conduct and interaction at exhibits. It draws on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis to reveal the social and sequential organisation of people's verbal, visual and bodily action and interaction.

**Findings** – People explore museums and examine exhibits with companions and while other visitors act and interact in the same locale. Which exhibits visitors look at and how they see and experience them is influenced by and arises in social interaction with others, be they companions or strangers. People display and share their experience of exhibits with others through verbal and bodily action and interaction.

**Research implications** – The findings bear upon current debates in marketing research. They suggest that there is a lack of understanding of people's experience of exhibits in museums. They show how video-based studies can address this gap in marketing research. Further studies are currently being conducted to shed light on the quality of people's experience at the exhibit-face and how it may be enhanced by the deployment of interpretation resources, such as labels, touch-screen and handheld systems.

**Practical implications** – The findings may have some implications for the work of curators, designers and exhibition evaluators. They suggest that social interaction needs to be taken into consideration when designing and deploying exhibits and interpretation resources, such as labels, touch-screen information kiosks, hand-held computers, etc.

**Originality/value** – The paper uses visual/video-recordings as principal data and illustrates its findings by virtue of visual material. It introduces video-based field studies as a method to examine cultural and visual consumption in museums. It employs an analytic and methodological framework from ethnomethodology and

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conversation analysis that previously have found little application in marketing and consumer research.

**Keywords** Museum marketing, visual/cultural consumption, ethnomethodology, visitor studies, video

**Paper type** Research paper

## **Introduction**

In recent years, the social and organisational context in which museums operate has fundamentally changed. Museums have lost their obligatory claim for public funding and increasingly compete with other leisure and educational institutions for visitors. In the light of these developments the once object-centred museum concerned with the collection, conservation and display of objects is being transformed to a visitor-centred institution. The orientation towards the audience and the visitor entails a growing importance of museum marketing (Kolb, 2000; Kotler and Kotler, 1998; Lumley, 1988; McLean, 1997; Walsh, 1992).

Museum marketing develops relationships with different constituencies, including the audience, friends, volunteers and sponsors. It employs methods and techniques from general marketing to identify different market segments and to explore visitors' interests, needs, perceptions and preferences. Its findings are used to inform exhibition planning and development (Kolb, 2000; Kotler and Kotler, 1998; McLean, 1997). Yet, museum marketing has shown relatively little interest in visitors' experience of exhibits and leaves this area of research to visitor studies (for rare exceptions see, Goulding, 1999b; 2000).

Visitor studies are a largely applied field of research primarily concerned with the evaluation and assessment of exhibits. The focus of visitor studies is the assessment of the educational impact of exhibitions on the audience. Visitor research employs a range of methods to assess whether exhibits attract and hold people's attention and to explore people's experience and understanding of exhibitions. These methods include behavioural measures, field observation and different interview techniques (Falk and Dierking, 2000; Hein, 1998). Unfortunately, visitor research is often preoccupied with the educational role of museums and the learning outcome of museum visits whilst ignoring other aspects of the museum experience.

In recent years, some concern has been voiced over the separation of marketing and visitor research. It is being argued that

- visitor studies may produce observations and findings of relevance to museum marketing and museum managers (Kelly and Sas, 1998; Webb, 1993), and
- marketing research may offer methods and techniques to broaden the scope of visitor studies (Caldwell, 2002; Gilmore and Rentschler, 2002; Rentschler, 1998; Rentschler and Potter, 1996; Rentschler and Reussner, 2002).

This paper draws on two bodies of research, marketing and sociology: *Marketing research* is increasingly interested in using ethnographic, observational and video-based methods to study people's response to shopping and retail environments. It has begun to illuminate people's behaviour at the 'point of sale' and their response to the design and layout of shops (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Carson, Gilmore, Gronhaug and Perry, 2001; Firat, 2005). In *Sociology* video-based field studies coupled with a particular analytic framework, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks, 1992) are increasingly being used to reveal the ways in which people socially organise their action and interaction at workplaces and other settings (Heath and Luff 2000; Luff, Hindmarsh et al., 2000).

The analysis uses video-recordings as principal data to explore how museum visitors approach, orient to and examine exhibits. It is particularly interested in the processes of conduct and interaction at the exhibit-face where people make the experience of the original object – at the 'point of experience' as we may call it. The paper discusses how detailed observations of visitors' conduct and interaction in museums may inform the design and deployment of exhibits and interpretation resources and how video-based field studies may contribute to current debates in museum marketing and cultural consumption.

The examples are drawn from a substantial corpus of video recordings and field observations of conduct and interaction in museums, galleries and craft fairs. The corpus includes materials from art and decorative art museums such as the Courtauld Galleries in London, the Djanogly Art Gallery in Nottingham, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London as well as from science centres and museums like the Science Museum in London, Explore-at-Bristol and Green's Mill in Nottingham. In this paper, we discuss a small number of fragments from our data to examine how people collaboratively view and make sense of artwork and other kinds of exhibit, and in particular how the ways of looking at and responding to exhibits arise in social interaction.

## **Background**

In marketing research there has been a long-standing interest in how people's shopping behaviour "at the point of sale" (Phillips and Bradshaw, 1993) may be influenced by cognitive dispositions, interests and motivations (Kotler, 2000), by advertisements (Baldinger and Robinson, 1996), by the buying intentions of family members (Ehrenberg, 1972; McGoldrick, 1982; Nancarrow and Tinson, 2005) and by the design and layout of the shopping environment (Shields, 1992; Zukin, 1991). In recent years, consumer research has increasingly become interested in employing qualitative, observational and ethnographic methods to investigate consumer behaviour and the experience of consumption (Beckmann and Elliot, 2000). Studies consider different forms of consumer participation (Harris and Baron, 2004; Rodie and Kleine, 2000). They explore shopping as an everyday activity (Miller, 1998). They investigate people's behaviour in shopping malls and other large retail environments (Kozinets, Sherry, Deberry-Spence, Duhachek, Nuttavuthisit and Storm, 2002; Penaloza, 1998; Sherry, Kozinets, Storm, Duhacheck, Nuttavuthisit and DeBerry-Spence, 2001), in swap meets and flea markets (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf, 1988; Sherry, 1990) and at rodeo shows and rave events (Goulding and Shankar, 2004; Penaloza, 2001). These studies point towards converging interests in studies of shopping and cultural consumption.

The field of cultural consumption is pervaded by influences from Bourdieu's (1990; 1991) famous studies. In recent years, a range of studies has drawn on Bourdieu's work and developed theories and concepts to understand cultural consumption. They explain how age and gender as well as socio-demographic and educational background influence people's participation with culture (Katz-Gerro, 2004; Kirchberg, 1996; Schulze, 2003). They argue that the ways in which people orient to, view and make sense of cultural objects and events is shaped by social attributes and dispositions. These studies have recently been complemented by a growing number of ethnographies of cultural consumption. They have begun to reveal the specifics of the situation in which people actually experience cultural content. Audience research demonstrates how activities like watching TV and seeing films in cinemas or listening to music are embedded in the wider context of people's everyday lives (Ang, 1995; Lull, 1990; Scrinivas, 2002; Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992). These

studies highlight the importance of situational factors that influence the experience of cultural content.

Theories and methods used in studies of cultural consumption and audience research have recently been drawn on to investigate museum visiting as everyday activity. Studies consider museum consumption as a social activity that forms part of people's everyday lives (Bagnall, 2003; Longhurst, Bagnall and Savage, 2004; Storey, 1999). They investigate the social context in which people visit museums (Newman and McLean, 2002). Yet, relatively little research explores the social and situational context in which people experience and make sense of exhibits and exhibitions in situ when they face the original objects.

There is of course the large body of visitor research that primarily assesses the effectiveness of exhibits and exhibitions in attracting and holding visitors' attention (Screven, 1976; Serrell, 1998; Shettel, 2001). It now increasingly recognises the importance of social interaction and talk for people's experience of exhibits. Studies inspect how visitors' understanding of exhibits is mediated and enhanced by their talk with others (Leinhardt, Crowley and Knutson, 2002). They illuminate how the composition of groups as well as the age and gender of participants influence the emergence of talk between people (Blud, 1990; McManus, 1988). These studies are preoccupied with the impact of social interaction on the educational outcome of museum visits. They focus on the content of talk and its relationship to the exhibition. Yet, they largely ignore the social organisation of talk and how it is embedded within visitors' bodily conduct and their interaction with others.

As part of a small programme of research we have recently begun to explore visitors' practical experience of exhibits. We investigate how people examine exhibits in social interaction with each other and how the experience of exhibits is inextricably embedded within the practical circumstances in which it is produced (Heath and vom Lehn, 2004; vom Lehn, Heath and Hindmarsh, 2001). This paper wishes to advance this body of work and complement ongoing research in museum marketing, cultural consumption and visitor research. It uses video-recordings as principal data together with a particular analytic framework to explore visitors' conduct and interaction at the exhibit-face where the experience of the original object is made.

## Methods and Data

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in interpretative methods to study consumer behaviour and the shopping experience (Beckmann and Elliot, 2000; Carson, Gilmore, Gronhaug and Perry, 2001; Goulding, 1999a; 1999b; 2000; 2001). In the light of this development, marketing and consumer research increasingly use video-data to study people's behaviour at the point of sale (Belk and Kozinets, 2003; Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, 1989; Firat, 2005; O'Guinn and Belk, 1989; O'Reilly and Larsen, 2005). They reveal the potential of video-recordings as a technique to understand people's conduct on the shop floor. They unpack the activities that constitute shopping, such as walking through shopping isles, glancing at products, inspecting objects, looking back and forth, etc. By subjecting video-data of people's conduct to scrutiny the researcher can unravel these packages of activities and uncover how the design and layout of shops may influence people's behaviour at the point of sale (Brown, 2004; Underhill, 1999).

There also has been a considerable interest in video as principal data in visitor studies. A growing number of researchers have recognised that we know relatively little of how the "museum experience" (Falk and Dierking, 1992) emerges at the 'point of experience', where visitors face and examine the exhibit both alone and in concert with others. They use video-recordings because they provide access to visitors' verbal and bodily actions at the exhibit-face. Yet, they often focus on visitors' talk (Leinhardt, Crowley and Knutson, 2002) and do not have developed an analytic and methodological framework for the analysis of people's bodily conduct and its embeddedness within talk and interaction.

The approach employed in this paper draws on analytic developments in the social sciences in particular ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) and conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992). The thrust of these developments revolves around the situated and emergent character of social action and the ways in which it relies upon a body of tacit, socially organised practice and procedure;- a 'methodology' on which participants rely in producing their own conduct and making sense of the actions of others. The approach involves the detailed transcription and analysis of visitors' talk and bodily comportment. It examines how visitors produce and coordinate their actions with each other,- not just with those they are with, but also with others who happen to be in the same space. It is concerned with taking the participants'

perspective seriously, examining their actions and activities as they arise, and exploring how visitors organise their conduct and experience in interaction with others (Heath, 2004; vom Lehn and Heath, in press-a).

Data collection, recording in museums and galleries, raises certain practical and ethical issues. As part of various projects, we are currently undertaking data collection in various science centres and museums including Explore@Bristol, the Science Museum (London), Green's Mill Nottingham, as well as the Victoria and Albert Museum (London) and the Tate Britain. We normally set up a camera on a tripod relatively near particular exhibits and then leave it to record what takes place over quite lengthy periods. We record at different times and on different days to enable us to gather a substantial amount of data, which includes different types of visit and visitor. To reduce the influence of the camera on the visitors' conduct we mount it on a tripod or a wall and separate it from the domain under study and from the researcher who whilst the recordings are running observes the scene and makes field notes.

In gathering data we have had extensive discussions with museum managers concerning how we should inform visitors and gain their cooperation. The procedure that has been agreed is that we place notices at the entrance to the museum and the gallery or area under study. The notices inform visitors about the research and invite them to refuse permission if they have any objections. The researcher always remains in the vicinity and is available to discuss the research and, of course, stop recording if requested. We also provide visitors with the opportunity of having the materials destroyed after the event if they have any objections. Until now, we have received only interest and support from visitors who seem delighted that we are concerned with the ways in which they use and experience the exhibits.

This paper uses video-data gathered at the Courtauld Galleries and the Victoria and Albert Museum (both in London), Djanogly Art Gallery (Nottingham) and the science centre Green's Mill in Nottingham. The data feature a wide range of visitors including, individuals, couples, families as well as school groups and professionals. Altogether we have gathered approximately 800 hours of video and a substantial corpus of field observations. We have also conducted a few informal interviews with museum managers, visitor researchers and a few selected visitors.

The video-data were collected with a conventional video-camera mounted on a tripod to film the action at selected exhibits. The exhibits were selected after extensive field observation and in discussion with the museum management. We have decided



to study exhibits that are popular with visitors, have been pointed out by museum managers and are of particular analytic interest to us. For the collection of the data, the researcher left the camera to record and only returned to change tapes. During the recording the researcher took field notes of events at the exhibits and other parts of the exhibitions. The notes together with other materials, such as informal interviews with visitors and the exhibition management, exhibit specifications, copies of labels, gallery guides and the like, provide important resources with which to situate and understand the conduct and interaction of visitors.

The analysis has been developed with regard to the recorded data. We begin by reviewing all materials and logging events and activities of initial interest. As we undertake analysis we develop collection tapes, in which we gather together candidate instances of particular activities. The analysis proceeds 'case by case' and involves the detailed investigation of particular fragments of data. Ordinarily the analysis involves the transcription and mapping of conduct and interaction, and the detailed study of interactional or potentially interactional character of particular actions and activities. We draw on the transcription system and techniques widely used in conversation analysis and cognate approaches to the study of social interaction (Goodwin, 1981; Heath, 1986; Kendon, 1990). Through the detailed analysis of single instances, and comparing and contrasting characteristic actions and activities between various fragments, we begin to identify the patterns and organisation of conduct and interaction. In common with more traditional ethnography, the instances discussed in this paper have been selected as they provide interesting or particularly clear examples to reflect the more common themes that we explore (Heath, 2004; vom Lehn and Heath, in press-a).

## **Approaching Exhibits**

There is a range of theories and concepts of how visitors navigate, explore and experience museums. They argue that visitor behaviour in museums is shaped either by the material environment, its design and layout, by people's cognitive dispositions or by a combination of environmental and cognitive influences. In recent years, these concepts of visitor behaviour have been complemented by approaches that recognise the impact of social interaction on the museum experience (Blud, 1990; Leinhardt, Crowley and Knutson, 2002; McManus, 1987; 1988). These studies produce important insights into people's response to exhibits and exhibitions; they particularly

assess the learning outcome of museum visits. Yet, they produce relatively little knowledge of the processes of action and interaction through which people come to approach and examine exhibits.

Consider the following fragment recorded at the Courtauld Galleries. It begins when Theresa stands by the label examining the associated painting while her husband, Michael, views one of the other canvases. As Theresa moves to the next exhibit to the right Michael turns around and monitors her actions.

**Transcript 1:**<sup>2</sup>

T You've got a mixture of stuff here  
(3.6)

Michael

Esther Running ( )

M: hmh?

T: Interesting. we're probably the only people that noticed that  
Very unusual

She walks towards the painting and points out that, “you’ve got a mixture of stuff here” and after a pause summons her husband, “Michael”. Her utterance and movement towards the painting occasion Michael to shift his orientation and approach to the exhibit on the right wall. He adopts a position next to her and they both view the painting wondering about the part it plays in the exhibition (Image 1.1. – 1.3.).

Image 1.1.



Image 1.2.



Image 1.3.



T: Michael

The fragment begins to reveal the social and interactional organisation of visitors' approach to exhibits. Theresa's actions encourage, if not demand, that Michael joins her by the exhibit. Michael's interest in the painting is occasioned by her actions. His

<sup>2</sup> The transcript uses the conventions from conversation analysis (Jefferson 1984). Pauses between utterances are indicated by (3.6) meaning a pause of 3 seconds and two thirds of a second, underlining is used to show where an utterance or parts of an utterance are stressed, a '?' shows the lowering of the voice and a (.....) stands for an utterance that could not be heard. The purpose of the transcript is to illustrate the sequential organisation of talk. It shows not only what has been said but also how an utterance has been produced and where in a conversation it has occurred.

approach to the artwork emerges in interaction and is coordinated with Theresa's viewing of the piece. When he arrives near the exhibit Theresa shifts her position to the left encouraging him to stand next to her and view the exhibit with her.

It would be wrong to consider the two visitors as individuals who respond to the exhibit by its particular features and characteristics by approaching and viewing it. Rather, considering their actions as a pair reveals the dynamics of their approach to and viewing of the piece; their actions arising in and through social interaction. Having encouraged her husband to come over and view the exhibit she provides him with a particular way of seeing the exhibit, "Interesting. We're probably the only people that noticed that (.) very unusual".

When people explore exhibitions they often meet strangers who happen to be there at the same time. Visitor research often considers the presence of others as a "social influence" (Bitgood, 1993) that can attract visitors to view an exhibit or occasion them to move elsewhere. The following fragment has been recorded at the Djanogly Art Gallery in Nottingham. We join the action when a group of three visitors examine one of the artworks. After a few moments, Mary who has been viewing a neighbouring exhibit arrives behind the three and glances at the exhibit from a distance (Image 2.1.). She then moves across to view a neighbouring artwork. While she views this exhibit one member of the group, Rosy, turns around, away from the print and begins to leave the area. Rosy's shift of posture occasions Mary to look to her left (Image 2.2.).

Image 2.1.

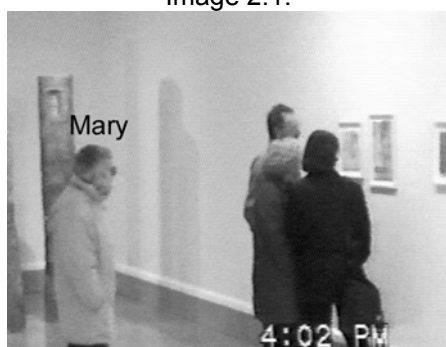


Image 2.2.



Mary then leaves the exhibit she has just looked at and stands further back where she scans the gallery while remaining aware of the activities of the group (Image 2.3.). Just when Rosy and then her companions leave the artwork Mary moves in to inspect the piece. The leaving of the group occasions Mary to turn around and move into the space at the print vacated by the group (Image 2.4.).

Image 2.3.



Image 2.4.



The fragment illuminates that what people look at and for how long may be influenced by the conduct of complete strangers who happen to be in the same space at the same time. Visitors design their actions in close coordination with others by using their bodily conduct and orientation as resources to assess the trajectory of their course of actions. In the case at hand, Mary notices a group of visitors gathering at a particular artwork. Her interest in this particular piece may have been occasioned by the way in which the others conduct themselves at the exhibit-face. She views a neighbouring exhibit but remains aware of the events to her left. When she notices Rosy's change in orientation she leaves the exhibit and stands where she can move towards the exhibit the others have been inspecting. As soon as the artwork becomes available she moves in and inspects it.

Although Mary explores the exhibition on her own she approaches and views the exhibit in interaction with other visitors. Consider how the fragment continues. Mary stands at and examines the print. She displays through her posture and gaze that she looks at the print she is facing at this moment. A little later another visitor, Andrea, appears in Mary's back (Image 2.5.). Andrea walks around Mary and when on level with her turns left (Image 2.6.). While walking across she looks at the print and bends her upper body slightly forward but continues her approach to the label next to the print (Image 2.7.).

Image 2.5.



Image 2.6.



Image 2.7.



The fragment illustrates how people socially organise the viewing of exhibits when they approach and face exhibits in the presence of other visitors. Mary and Andrea navigate the exhibition without companions. Their approach to and viewing of the exhibits is influenced by the presence and actions of others. Mary's approach to the print has been accomplished in coordination with other visitors who have viewed the exhibit before. Her looking at the print is achieved through bodily practices, which are "observable and reportable phenomena" (Garfinkel, 1967). Through the way in which Mary stands in front of the print, her posture and gaze direction, she displays that she is viewing a particular exhibit. Her actions ongoingly produce and render visible the 'view space' between her and the artwork. When Andrea arrives at the exhibit she designs her approach to the exhibit by displaying that she has recognised the view space between Mary and the print. When crossing Mary's line of sight she produces a "body gloss" (Goffman, 1971) showing that she recognises her infringement on another visitor's view space. Body glosses like the slight bending of the upper body or head, sometimes accompanied by a brief utterance, "Sorry", are a way to render the infringement in others' activities acceptable in social encounters. They are designed to display one's awareness of the infringement without opening an opportunity for sustained social interaction.

The two fragments illuminate that the approach to and viewing of exhibits often arise in social interaction with others, companions as well as strangers. What people look at and for how long is neither prefigured by intrinsic qualities of the exhibits and their layout as suggested by visitor research (Bitgood 1993, 1994; Shettel 1968), nor predefined by visitors' cognitive dispositions (Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson, 1995; Screven, 1969, , 1986), nor simply stimulated by the actions of strangers or companions as argued in some areas of marketing (Harris and Baron 2004). But, approaching and viewing exhibits are produced in social situations. People coordinate their viewing of exhibits with others, draw the attention of others to particular exhibits, produce bodily actions to create a view space at exhibits and display their respect of others' view space through body glosses and brief utterances.

## **Embodying Experience**

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the "embodied experience" of aesthetic, leisure and shopping environments (Joy and Sherry, 2003). These studies

largely draw on interview data to reveal how people's cognitive and subjective experience is shaped by their bodily relationship to the environment. The focus of these studies is with the individual and her/his subjective, inner experience of the world. They rarely examine how the body is involved in the practical production of the experience in situations where they are with others.

Consider the following fragment recorded at a funny mirror in the science centre Green's Mill in Nottingham. The mirror reflects an upside-down image of the visitor who looks into it. We briefly examine how Jasmine approaches the mirror and discovers the upside down image.

Image 3.1.



J: ahuhuhuhu (.) huhihi

Jasmine stands in front of the mirror and through her verbal and bodily conduct displays her excitement about the reflection of herself in the mirror. She has her eyes wide open, holds her hands up at her mouth and bursts out in laughter, “ahuhuhuhu (.) huhihi”; thus displaying her excitement about the upside-down image in the mirror.

The sole examination of this moment in the girl's encounter with the mirror may give the impression that her response expresses an inner, subjective and cognitive feeling about the upside down image. Yet, such an analysis ignores the emergence of Jasmine's looking at and responding to the mirror. Consider how her encounter with the mirror arises in interaction with her father.

**Transcript 2:**

F: oh look  
 (1.0)  
 oh dear look  
 (1.9)  
 J: ahuhuhuhu (.) huhihi  
 F: you r upside down  
 [ huhuhu  
 [ hey

Jasmine is drawn to the exhibit by her father who calls her over to look into the mirror, “Oh look” (Image 3.2.). When she arrives by his side he grabs her by her right arm and pulls her in, “Oh dear look”. As she is pulled into a position facing the mirror she begins to laugh (Image 3.3.).

Image 3.2.



F: Oh look

Image 3.3.



F: Oh dear look

She gradually increases the volume and intensity of her laughter while she moves closer to her father and in front of the mirror; the laughter reaching its acme when her father holds her with both hands in a position facing the mirror. She holds both her hands at her mouth displaying her excitement about the image in the mirror (Image 3.1.).

The fragment reveals the social and sequential organisation through which people respond to exhibits in interaction with others. Jasmine’s response to the exhibit is occasioned by her father’s verbal and bodily actions. Her father draws the girl to the exhibit to look into the mirror. He designs his summons for her to reveal he has something interesting to show. He upgrades the urgency of his summons by calling Jasmine a second time and by physically pulling her in. Jasmine displays her excitement about the experience of the mirror image even before being in a position where she can see her upside-down image. Her early laughter exhibits anticipation for another amusing experience her father is about to create for her. She gradually intensifies her response as she comes into a position where she actually sees herself upside-down; her excitement culminating in an outburst of laughter when she is in her father’s arms. Her laughter and bodily response to the exhibit visibly displays that she has seen the mirror images; her father now can assume that Jasmine has discovered the up-side-down reflection in the mirror.

This observation adds to recent discussions in consumer research that explore different aspects of the embodied experience (Joy and Sherry, 2003). It reveals how people's experience of exhibits and exhibitions fundamentally relies on their bodily being and acting in the world. In this sense bodily actions and embodied experience are inextricably intertwined. Yet, people's action and experience often arise in social situations where they interact with others. They encounter and examine exhibits through verbal and bodily actions that are coordinated with the actions of others. Their verbal and bodily display of an experience of exhibits therefore does not reflect an internal, subjective experience but is produced in the light of the presence of others. The display of the experience is designed as a response to the exhibit while revealing to others that an exhibit has been seen in a particular way.

## **Shaping Experience**

There has been a growing concern with the provision of "memorable experiences" for consumers of shopping, retail and museum environments (Pine and Gilmore 1999). It is widely assumed that such experiences are created and prefigured by specialists in experience design. For example, exhibition designers develop and deploy objects and artefacts to be viewed and examined by visitors. They hope visitors respond to these objects by showing some kind of admiration, surprise and wonder and by learning from them. The concepts and theories of visitors' response to exhibits often ignore that people approach and examine exhibits in social situations; memorable experience of exhibits therefore may arise in and through social interaction.

Consider the following fragment recorded at Foggini's sculpture "Samson and the Philistines" on display in the "Europe 1500-1600" gallery at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Anne and Gulia have briefly viewed the front of the sculpture when Anne moves to an exhibit behind the sculpture and Gulia inspects the right side of the exhibit. Gulia inspects the design of the sculpture's feet and after a brief moment turns towards Anne, "(But I mean)you get a lo:t of", followed by a pause of a second or so. During that pause Anne turns to Gulia and the sculpture. She walks close to the exhibit and stands next to Gulia where she can monitor Gulia's gesture across the sculpture's feet. While Anne moves over Gulia completes her utterance "a lo:t of veins", and provides her companion with an account of what she has seen and what she wishes her companion to discover. She depicts her perception and experience of the sculpture's feet by point out "the veins in the feet" and "the



toenails”, while overlaying these exhibit features with gestures with her little finger, displaying the delicateness of the design of the sculpture’s feet (Image 4.1. – 4.3.).



Gulia characterises the design of the sculpture’s feet by providing Anne with resources to see them in a particular way. On Anne’s arrival she visually orients to the sculpture’s feet and overlays them with gestures, displaying that this particular part of the sculpture is the focus of her interaction with Anne. She designs her talk and gestures to portray the delicateness of the design of the feet by pointing out the little veins and toes, and by overlaying these exhibit features with gestures. These gestures accomplished with a flat hand and a little finger stroking across the exhibit are designed to render visible these exhibit features in their detail and delicateness. They occasion Anne to look at the feet and acknowledge that she has seen their delicate design, “mhmm” and “I know”.

The fragment illustrates how visitors may employ verbal and bodily actions to show a companion an exhibit and its features in a particular way. They reference and show the object and thus produce a way of seeing and experiencing the exhibit in the situation at hand. The object and its design provide the visitors with resources to produce an experience for another. Visitors are not the receivers of experiences created by professional experience producers, such as exhibition designers, curators and the like; but they become ‘ad-hoc experience producers’ who momentarily shape how each other views and makes sense of exhibits.

## Discussion

This paper has arisen in the light of the curious lack of marketing and visitor research concerned with people’s action and interaction at the exhibit-face. The analysis

suggests that the experience of exhibits is fundamentally produced in social interaction between visitors. It begins to reveal how people socially organise their action and interaction at the ‘point of experience’ where people examine and make sense of exhibits.

Consumer research recently considered people’s encounter with exhibits as “multisensory experience” (Joy and Sherry, 2003). Studies have begun to reveal that people’s bodily “being-in-the-world” is critical to their experience of aesthetic, leisure and shopping environments (Duhaime, Joy and Ross, 1995; Joy and Sherry, 2003; Küpers, 2002). This paper contributes to these debates by illuminating through a detailed analysis of video-recordings how people experience exhibitions through their bodily “being” and “acting” in the world (cf. Crossley, 2001).

People’s experience and understanding of exhibits arises in and through their bodily action in and upon the museum. They see and make sense of the artefacts through a range of activities, including walking and looking, glancing and inspecting, pointing and showing, talking and discussing and so forth. These activities are observable and reportable events that other visitors orient to and use as resources when exploring and examining exhibitions. By seeing others’ engagement with exhibits people can discriminate the state and quality of ongoing activities and align and coordinate their actions with them.

People’s observation of others engagement with and response to an exhibit provides them with an understanding of the artefact. They see what can be done at an exhibit and what kind of experience they can expect to have by seeing another’s actions and response to it. Their observation of others offers them information on an exhibit even before they have examined it. It may have an important influence on their decision to approach and examine the exhibit.

The response to an exhibit is not a cognitive and subjective product or process. It is produced while others are in the same locale who may use their observation to obtain an understanding of the exhibit and of the way in which another is seeing it. We have shown that people may design their response to an exhibit for others to see; thus displaying that they have experienced an exhibit in a particular way.

When people interact with others at exhibits they display their orientation and establish a mutual alignment to the object by virtue of their gaze and posture. They employ talk and gesture to reveal how they see the object and to influence and shape how their companions see and experience it. They embody exhibit features through

talk and its intonation and volume and by overlaying the object with carefully designed gestures. Thus, they momentarily produce experiences of exhibits for others. In many cases, their companions produce only very limited forms of response; yet, like an outburst of laughter at a funny mirror a simple ‘yes’ or ‘mhm’ in response to a reference to an exhibit often suffices to display that one has seen an exhibit feature.

In recent years, marketing and visitor research have increasingly used Bourdieu’s famous work to segment the audience and to enhance the attractiveness and educational value of exhibitions. They argue that people’s experience of exhibitions is influenced and shaped by their socio-economic, demographic and educational background (e.g. Goulding, 1999b). This paper complements this body of research. It provides a way of looking at the specifics of the context in which the museum experience emerges *in vivo*. Rather than exploring external influences, such as age, educational and economic background, that may impact people’s experience of exhibits the analysis looks at the action and interaction through which people encounter and make sense of exhibits as and when it is produced. Further studies may explore how people’s socio-economic and educational background, prior knowledge and experience bear upon the specific circumstances in which they examine and experience exhibits.

Despite the growing interest in how the response to museums is influenced by and arises in a social context it is often argued that many people choose to visit museums alone and to contemplate artwork without interacting with others (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990). This paper reveals that concepts of the individual viewer or ‘spectator’ fail to recognise that museums are public places where people even when arriving on their own often meet others who explore the exhibition at the same time. It illuminates that opportunities for ‘solitary viewing’ and ‘contemplation’ in museums often arise from and evolve in social situations. To create opportunities for individual viewing and appreciation people socially organise their actions with others at the exhibit to create a view space between themselves and the object that is visible as such to others. They display their engagement with an exhibit through their bodily actions that other people approaching the area become aware of and orient to her/his view space. They keep some distance to others’ view space or, when infringing on it, produce body glosses as displays of an apology. Thus, the analysis sheds light on the interactional work that people undertake to facilitate relatively undisturbed viewing of exhibits in social situations.

A detailed understanding of how visitors experience exhibits ‘at the point of experience’ may help reveal how the different facets of this experience are produced in and through social interaction at the exhibit-face. Such detailed understanding of the relationship between social interaction and the museum experience is of critical importance for the design of exhibits and exhibitions that support the emergence of particular kinds of experience in the social environment of the museum. For example, the observations discussed in this paper provide a basis to argue that:-

- the museum experience may be enhanced by resources that support visitors in producing experiences for others;
- interpretation resources, such as labels and text-panels as well as touch-screen systems and handheld computers, may be designed to facilitate collaborative engagement with exhibits; and
- when exhibits are supposed to be viewed and experienced by an individual, unaffected by events in the gallery they may be exhibited in areas of the museum that allow for individual inspection, contemplation and appreciation.

It has been quite surprising that despite the increasing importance of museum marketing and visitor research and the growing interest in “visual consumption” (Schroeder, 2002) relatively few studies have employed video-recordings to reveal how people experience and respond to artwork and other kinds of exhibit in museums. This paper, I hope, illuminates how a detailed analysis of video-recordings can help reveal how the experience of exhibits arises in museums. It suggests that what people look at and how they see it, is not prefigured by the museum managers and designers but ongoingly accomplished by the visitors who explore and inspect the museum in concert with others. Marketing research that acknowledges that people experience museums through their bodily and social engagement with the exhibits can make an important contribution to museum visitor research and our understanding of how people orient to and make sense of visual objects.

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